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ABSTRACT

The Reading Improvement Through Art (RITA) project is designed to improve the reading and comprehension abilities of teenagers who are at least two grades below normal reading level. In RITA, reading specialists and art teachers trained in the language experience approach collaborate to implement studio/craft art projects. During this collaboration, teachers provide students with vocabulary lists, practice and evaluation exercises in reading and writing, and adjunct reading materials related to the assigned art projects. The validation of RITA is evidence of its success, inviting the program's expansion and the establishing of art and reading as educational partners. But many avenues of investigation into the RITA program still await consideration, including studies on the commonality of visual perceptual skills in reading and art, the motivations that make the program work, RITA's longitudinal effects on student performance, and the value of RITA as an art education program. (RL)

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State Education Department Validation of

Reading Improvement Through Art *(R.I.T.A.)*

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In New York City, teenagers in nine urban high schools showed improved reading skills in a collaborative project involving Art and Reading specialists, in the creative atmosphere of a studio. When the R.I.T.A. project was initiated, in 1975, the climate for professional acceptance, if not aggressively hostile, was less than favorable. However, encouragement for this interdisciplinary practice continues to emerge in the literature of related fields.

Psychologist Rudolf Arnheim,[1] *in the chapter, "Visual Thinking in Education" writes: "In recent years, the notion of visual thinking has made its appearance everywhere. This cannot but give me some personal satisfaction. (Arnheim, 1969). But, it also astonishes me, because according to the long tradition of Western philosophy and psychology, the two concepts, perception and reasoning, do not belong under the same bedcover. One can characterize the traditional view by saying that the two concepts are believed to require each other but also to exclude each other....This supposed incompatability of mental functions that nevertheless cannot do without each other has disturbed philosophers throughout our history. It led to the underestimation of the senses and promoted thought to a splendid isolation that threatened it with sterility. In education, it made for a strict distinction between the necessary and honorable study of words and numbers and the luxury of a slightly indecent concern with the senses. When nowadays the budget for the teaching of the arts is the first to be cut as soon as the school system of a city is in financial trouble, we are still heirs to the pernicious split that has hampered our education thinking for so long."*

Art Educator Geraldine Dimondstein[2] *sees reading as a creative activity. "Language has become specialized," she cautions, "separating the senses into compartments. Perhaps the difficulties of teaching reading today stem from their abstract nature. The clue may be in presenting subject matter that is so germane to children's lives that the abstract nature is dissipated and the reality is in*

the words becoming a living experience." Professor Dimonstein deplores the unfortunate trend to increasingly specialize schooling, "...the effect has been to ingrain the "either/ors", separating the senses into compartments. The latest quasi-scientific support proferred is the left-brain/right-brain theory which holds that the left hemisphere mainly controls logical, purposeful categorizing action while the right is primarily in charge of intuition, aesthetic responses and the like. Accordingly, reading is presumably a linear, left-brain activity while responding to art is an intuitive right-brain function. We have become conditioned to perceiving in one modality at a time, and learning has been organized around such separateness. But, organically, the propensity of human beings is to function simultaneously, using all of the senses."

The Arts, Education and Americans Panel focused national attention on the senses in their report on the significance of the Arts for American education, [3] *Coming to Our Senses. R.I.T.A. was cited an exemplary program of "art as a tool for learning."*

The Council for Basic Education, an organization devoted to the strengthening of teaching and learning proclaimed the arts 'properly defined and well taught' a basic subject. In a further effort to define how the arts belonged in education, [4] *CBE published Occasional Paper #25. Therein, Dr. Robert Saunders, Arts Consultant for Connecticut State Education Department, declared that all the aspects of the arts are essential, and that art programs in secondary schools should not be only for students who are talented in art, and concurs that, as an extension of the arts-are-basic approach, "Reading (or other subjects) can be taught through the arts."*

Dr. Cecilia Pollack, [5] *an expert in the field of the learning disabled, reports on her visit to an experimental school in Bulgaria where psychiatrist Dr. Georgi Lozonov is trying to create a system of learning that not only develops the child's*

mental powers much faster, but frees his creativity and love of learning at the same time. Lozanov's system is based on "psychological relaxation" in a joyful atmosphere where learning can be motivated through the "globally operating emancipating and stimulating factors in the arts".

"Reading Improvement Through Art" is reinforced when the International Reading Association[6] *urges its members, via a position paper, not to use scare tactics and oversimplication to support "easy solutions for teaching children to read". IRA believes that "differences in learning styles and abilities of children emphasize the need for a variety of approaches to meet those individual needs. No single method or approach nor any one set of instructional materials has been proven to be most effective for all children".*

Psycholinguist Kenneth Goodman[7]*, in the debate about minimum competency standards, one of three viewpoints disseminated by IRA, urges us to study the students who are not succeeding, not just test them. "We must examine curricula, methodology, theory and classroom practice, not just the students. We must build objectives relevant to learners and consistent with scholarship, not simply mandate standards. In the field of reading, this all means seeing the problems of literacy in the context of what we know about the uses and learning of language. It means finding linguistic strength even in the system's losers. It means helping reading teachers to be more competent, not treating them as untrustworthy incompetents. And it means taking the lid off the mandated minimum competencies before it blows off."*

In the five years since R.I.T.A. methodology developed in high school art rooms out of the urgent needs of students and teachers, a wealth of supportive materials, in many disciplines add significance to our efforts, i.e. Arnheim, Dimonstein, Saunders, Pollack, Goodman and others. Project participants find that, in the creative atmosphere of an art room/studio, adolescents advance

naturally from concrete learning (manipulating tangible materials in a hands-on experiences) to abstract learning (symbols, words, language - spoken and written). Further, it is likely that a non-verbal teenager who has not responded to many years of conventional reading remediation will respond to a novel approach, in a different environment, especially if it is structured around manual skills which s/he feels comfortable with and nurtures communication through visual medi..

The R.I.T.A. project is designed to improve the reading and comprehension abilities of teenagers who are at least two grades below level. The Curriculum Guide[8] describes the variety of visual arts activities which motivate and stimulate reading. The art teacher, trained in the language experience approach, and the part-time reading specialist implement studio/craft projects which demand a sophisticated level of manipulative and aesthetic competence. The art teacher pursues her/his specialization i.e. photography, pottery, printmaking, adapting it to the R.I.T.A. method. In addition to devoting an hour per week to the art teacher alone, the reading teacher visits the art class twice a week. The collaboration produces the functional vocabulary lists, practice and evaluation exercises in reading and writing, plans for the master teacher journal and the student logs and rotating the books in The Reading Corner. The team assembles technical, historical, biographical reading materials about each art proje.. Each student maintains a log of class investigations, completes at least five quality art projects and composes a statement of purpose for each. Volunteer parents and student teachers are a component; a community-based exhibition is the culminating event.

Because R.I.T.A. classes are geared to the problem reader in an economical, group-based design, neither the diagnosed learning disabled nor the students for whom English is a second language are included in the regularly scheduled daily

forty-minute art class. In New York City, where a semester of art is mandated for diploma, the R.I.T.A. is taken in lieu of this requirement. It is possible for a R.I.T.A. participant to be concurrently programmed in a Remedial Reading workshop or any other reading class and to elect R.I.T.A. for more than one semester, if desired.

Since 1975, demonstration classes at John F. Kennedy High School in The Bronx, New York have been open to observers. After a rigorous evaluation process, New York State Education Department granted the coveted "valid" certificate to Reading Improvement Through Art. Presently, as a Demonstration Project, R.I.T.A. must conduct awareness activities throughout New York State in order to identify potential replicators. The Demonstrator also assists secondary schools to prepare applications for competitive ESEA IV-C funding (maximum $5,000.)

The pilot project, including eight public schools and one non-public high school was evaluated by the New York City Board of Education, Office of Educational Evaluation; function number BE 09-63604, SED 42-75-1214, (Appendix A). Statistical analysis of the reading pre- and post-test showed that ninth and eleventh graders' mean grade equivalent was nine months over a three month span and the tenth graders showed a mean grade equivalent of more than one year over a three month span. The improvement remains consistent in each of the school sites, regardless of the variables of in-service training, reading teacher alloted time and so forth. Most recently, in the Winter '79 term just concluded, in five R.I.T.A. classes (average register 25 pupils per) at Kennedy, the mean pre-test score was 5.87. The mean post-test score for these students was 6.5352. In order to determine whether these differences in test scores were significantly different, a t test was performed on the data. The results, using this procedure, indicated a significant difference between the*

*See related document CS 005 343

students' pre-test and post-test scores ($t = 2.97$, $p < .01$) Table 5, page 15, of the Pilot Project Evaluation Report (Appendix A) summarizes attendance gains. In all instances, students who were pre- and post-tested, maintained a higher attendance record than the average percent of attendance of the school populations at respective sites.

Now that R.I.T.A. is validated in New York State, we can estimate that between five and eight high schools will receive ESEA IV-C seed money to replicate R.I.T.A. during school year '80. Optimistically, a similar number will qualify for funding for school year '81. These unique populations, plus the data gleaned in five years in several New York City high schools, offer a rare field for directed educational investigation.

Reading Improvement Through Art has not been without critics. Some cite the absence of casual analysis and control groups; others decry our failure to measure the art outcome along with the reading; others voice concern, on philosophical grounds, about the utilization of aesthetic experiences for academic goals.

However, in light of the realistic challenge high school teachers face every day --- to lift almost half of our school population to a minimum level of functional literacy --- R.I.T.A.'s validated methodology holds far reaching implications. To date, few have picked up the gauntlet.

Review of Art Education Research[9] and Studies in Art Education[10] devote scant space to collaborative ventures; art-and-anything else seems unpopular with the editors. The Journal of Reading[11] promotes reading "in the content areas". Unfortunately, the contents are English, social science, science and mathematics. Art is omitted, consistently. NIE/CEMREL's directory of investigators and their fields of inquiry, Research in the Arts and Aesthetic Education[12] reports no attention to any aspect of the arts as a tool for learning, in 1978, nor did Harvard's Project Zero[13] find the subject within its scope of studies in that

year.

In order to establish reading and art as educational partners and remove the misconceptions about the independence of the two disciplines, many avenues of investigation are possible. For instance:

Perception

Are the common visual perceptual skills: tracking, scanning, visual analysis, figure/ground differentiation, general visual acuity, synthesis, memory, closures and imagery integrated into both art performance and reading skills? Develop a measurement of application of the common skills to art and to reading; correlate.

[14]

Motivation

What portion of R.I.T.A. students' reading performance is attributable to motivation? Which type of motivation is most often employed? Which is most effective; achievement, locus of control, curiosity, anxiety, general academic, attitude? What are the connections between genuine creative, manual activities and attention to reading?

Retention

Study the R.I.T.A. project participants over a five year span: how do they compare with their peers in general academic performance, drop-out rate, attendance, attitude?

[15]

Education Connoisseurship

What does this technique recommend as an alternate scheme to evaluate a R.I.T.A. class? Devise an instrument for R.I.T.A. teacher self-evaluation.

Neuropsychology of Language and Reading

What are the implications of neurological bases for behavior of the problem reader in R.I.T.A. classes?

Affective domain

How does a reader's emotional mood influence his/her reading comprehension?

Art Activity

How can artistic production in R.I.T.A. classes be assessed? How can students' aesthetic growth and skills development be evaluated independently of their comprehension and reading skills?

General

What hypotheses are researchers currently testing which have a bearing on the R.I.T.A. project?

We welcome visitors to the Demonstration Classes. A prior phone call is advisable, (212) 562-6262. We are grateful for information and advice relevant to the improvement of Reading Improvement Through Art.

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